



The Northbridge curfew (B)

In June 2003, Western Australia's Gallop government introduced its *Young People in Northbridge Strategy* which required children under 12 to leave Northbridge after dark and those under 15 to leave after 10pm. While Mission Australia was opposed to the curfew, the organisation continued to work with the police at the On Track headquarters. Two years after the policy's introduction, Sergeant Paul Coveney was seconded to the Juvenile Aid Group (JAG) unit at On Track. He believed that the line between social work and policing had become too blurred, creating discipline and security issues. Where youth workers once had unrestricted access to the police side of the building, he decided to lock the adjoining door to ensure they weren't at risk of violence and that the juveniles waiting to be processed weren't given an audience for any misbehaviour. It was a move that was not at all popular with the Mission Australia staff.

Strategy becomes reality

On 15 April 2003, Premier Geoff Gallop announced his intention to introduce a youth curfew in Northbridge. This move prompted immediate criticism from a variety of groups and individuals, including Mission Australia's WA manager Anne Russell-Brown and Nyoongar Patrol chairman Neville Collard who reportedly found the proposal "offensive" and claimed that it "could cause irreparable damage to the relationship between the Government and Aboriginals." He said: "It has put us back 50 years. The Native Welfare mentality is alive and kicking - this was a very rude shock to members of the Nyoongar

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Patrol, members of my family and members of my community.”¹ Youth and welfare groups claimed that they hadn’t been consulted about the government’s plans. The effectiveness of curfews was also questioned.²

Nonetheless, the plan went ahead and by June, the Office of Crime Prevention had finalised its *Young People in Northbridge Strategy (Exhibit A)* which would see children under 13 banned from Northbridge after dark, while those aged 13-15 would be required to leave after 10pm. Children deemed by police to be at low risk of physical or moral danger would be advised to move on. Those refusing to leave, behaving antisocially or who were in some way incapacitated would be taken to the On Track centre. The policy would rely on existing provisions in the *Child Welfare Act*; no new legislation would be introduced. Launched on a wintry night in late June, the policy was quickly hailed a success by the Premier.³ Despite the controversy, local traders welcomed its introduction, as did the public. A poll conducted for *The West Australian* showed that 79 percent of those surveyed supported the initiative whilst only 11 percent were opposed outright (*Exhibit B*).

As for the police, media reports suggested that they were unhappy about the proposal,⁴ and had concerns about “the parameters of police powers, where resources were coming from and how agencies would collaborate.”⁵ Privately, some officers believed that the curfew proposal represented little more than political “window dressing”. By contrast, Inspector Charlie Carver recounted that the overall response within the force was one of “business as usual”. Deputy Commissioner Chris Dawson considered the proposal a good opportunity to marshal extra resources towards dealing with a serious problem. While he appreciated that it was not a popular plan in some quarters, for him, children’s safety took precedence: ‘I was personally pleased that Gallop took a leadership role in this. And I think he did that at some risk. Groups like the Aboriginal Legal Service and others were quite critical of it. But in my view, no one can rightly argue that kids in those situations are not at risk.’ However, Dawson was less concerned with the actual policy detail:

“From the start, I was very resistant of any notional time. You can be just as unsafe in the middle of the day as 2am in the morning. Your decision on whether you should apprehend a child should be based on risk not on an arbitrary, ‘It’s 10pm, you should be off the street.’ When the policy came out, I issued an instruction to the police officers: base your judgement on risk. I think the policy provided a level of clarity as a communication tool to young people and their parents i.e.: ‘We believe that after a certain time this is not a good space for you to be in.’ I can understand the reason and the rationale behind it, my point is that police can’t respond to a policy statement about an arbitrary time-line. You must base your decisions on risk and protection issues.”

¹ Gauntlett, K. and Wilson-Clark, C. ‘Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt’ *The West Australian* 16 April 2003.

² ‘Curfew plan lacks substance’ *The West Australian* 16 April 2003.

³ ‘Youth Curfew is only the start.’ *The West Australian*, 1 July 2003.

⁴ Gauntlett, K. and Wilson-Clark, C. ‘Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt’ *The West Australian* 16 April 2003.

⁵ *ibid.*

Despite Mission Australia's ongoing philosophical opposition to the policy, the organisation continued to work with the police and the Department of Community Development (DCD) in Northbridge whilst repeatedly stating its position. Although the agency generally enjoyed productive relationships with government representatives at all levels, On Track team leader Peter Feasey recalled that Mission Australia did come under pressure to temper its comments. But as Feasey explained:

“Basically Mission Australia is in a position where we're not tied to the state government in terms of service delivery. This means that if we believe our clients aren't being fairly treated, or things aren't being done properly that we're actually in a position to make our comments known because there's no fear of not receiving our next instalment.... We've kept our stance the whole way through: we don't support the notion of a curfew. We agree with the notion of picking young people up because they're at risk and we also support the notion of putting in additional resources to cope with those demands.”

Those additional resources included two on-site DCD Crisis Care workers (previously they had only been accessible by phone). The Department also allocated three Outreach workers who would patrol Northbridge, helping children home or directing them towards the appropriate service (*Exhibit C*). A year into the new policy the Office of Crime Prevention released a policy progress report. It found that from June 2003 to June 2004, police had 961 contacts with 529 children. Most (64 percent) presented only once, were female (66 percent) and aged between 13-15 (66 percent). The number of juvenile arrests was down from 131 in 2002-2003 to 105 the following year. Adult arrests had also fallen during the same period (1515 to 1139). Anecdotal reports suggested that there were fewer young people on the streets at night and less antisocial behaviour. Traders, residents and patrons also reported an increased sense of safety security.⁶

“Business as usual”

From the viewpoint of most participants, the *Young People in Northbridge Strategy* changed little about how JAG and On Track worked together on a day-to-day basis, save the provision of extra DCD staff which helped with the placement process and project coordination. The police and Mission Australia had been working together in Northbridge since 1999 and the overall consensus at both organisations was that the arrangement generally worked quite well. Each Monday, centre workers, DCD staff and the police would meet to discuss the cases of the previous week, decide what form of follow-up support was required and ensure that agencies weren't duplicating their efforts unnecessarily.

During the evenings, youth workers and DCD staff spared police officers the often complex and tiresome task of tracking down a child's parent/guardian or arranging alternative accommodation. Youth who had been apprehended by police would sometimes provide false details, whereas they were more likely to be truthful with On Track staff. Access to the Mission Australia section of the building could also work as a

⁶ *Young People in Northbridge Strategy: One Year On* Office of Crime Prevention, Department of Premier and Cabinet, June 2004 pp. 5-7.

useful incentive. Unlike the spartan wooden benches and desks of the police section, On Track was a much more comfortable environment with couches and video games. However, the collaboration was not without its hiccups. According to Peter Feasey, staff turnover within the police had presented one of the biggest problems:

“None of the police that are in the city at the moment at whatever level have been in their positions much longer than two years. What has happened before in the project is sometimes unknown. All those factors can affect how our service operates and our relationship with JAG based on the style of police that are actually managing it.”

Hand-over was a problem for Sergeant Paul Coveney, who arrived to head up JAG in 2005. He claimed that there had been little in the way of induction, leading him to inadvertently breach some established protocols and put centre staff offside. Coveney had a background in juvenile justice and early into his tenure decided that things needed to change. He felt his predecessor had veered too far into the welfare arena, creating a degree of role conflict for police officers and potential security issues. One of the first changes he made was to restrict access between the police and On Track areas by locking the connecting door and requiring youth workers to wait for police authorisation before entering. Explained Coveney:

“Our partners used to pretty much have free run of the police side of the JAG building. Nowadays we don’t let that happen, to many of our partners’ disgust quite frankly. I don’t want them here for a few reasons. Firstly, if kids are going to hit somebody it will generally be (the social workers) because we’ve got weapons and they haven’t. Secondly, young people are more likely to play up when they’ve got an audience and they don’t tend to do it as much in front of coppers because we don’t react and we jump on bad behaviour far more quickly.”

From Coveney’s perspective, his main priority and responsibility was to protect both the centre staff and the children as they were effectively in police custody. As long as children were in the centre, at least one officer also had to be present. He believed that a strict, schoolmasterly approach was the best way to nip troublesome behaviour in the bud. Coveney acknowledged that children coming through the centre had a variety of different problems and needed to be treated accordingly but didn’t want police becoming too friendly with them and forgetting their role as officers. He also didn’t want the children to become too comfortable and treat the JAG branch as a youth drop-in centre or free taxi service. According to Coveney, the centre had experienced problems with self-presenters – for example, kids who missed the last train and simply wanted a ride home. Said Coveney:

“I’ve been pretty clear about what I expect from my staff and how I expect our partners to work. Because the lines perhaps weren’t so clear and blunt before I got here, I had to put quite a few noses out of joint. My job is to do the police part, their job is to do the social work part.”

Coveney knew that his approach wasn’t popular but believed that it was necessary to ensure that the children were processed as efficiently and safely as possible. Each incident took up additional time and manpower; he preferred that his officers were out

patrolling the streets as much as possible. Coveney also noted that youth-workers varied considerably in their ability to place children – some consistently managed to clear cases quickly, others took much longer. This caused backlogs on busy nights and created frustration as there was limited space at the centre. But in Coveney's opinion, the differences also ran deeper:

“Having worked with people from welfare backgrounds before, they seem very keen on the idea of a lot of consultation and workshopping and I understand that but unfortunately I'm the supervisor of this, in effect, satellite police station and I explain the reasons I take a decision but if they don't like it, bad luck. We're always going to have philosophical differences with our partners because we're coming at the problem from different angles... When you're dealing with a young person you are dealing with justice outcomes and welfare outcomes but you can have both a high justice and a high welfare outcome at the same time; they don't have to be different things. Even though I've tried explaining to our partners why I do the things I do, they're still philosophically opposed to it. We have totally different expectations of each other.”

In Feasey's view, individual personalities and relationships had a significant impact on day-to-day operations. He recognised that the police and welfare workers were going to approach situations differently but found that some officers were more accommodating than others, “In the past, [the police and youth workers] had good relations, problems were worked out easily. It wasn't a case of: ‘Here is the line; don't cross it.’ It was: ‘We need to have a line here but we'll discuss what that means’ These are the kinds of factors that can push the project forward or hinder its development.” Although On Track continued to function, Feasey noted that their centre workers had limited informal dealings with police, interactions were typically “business only” – a situation he felt wasn't ideal. It was also harder to resolve issues on the spot, more formal meetings were required.

“Previously we dealt with a more community-focused police,” said Feasey. “I guess we're currently going through a time where they have more of a target focus than a community focus which can be a problem for this style of service. These are the sorts of things we discuss in an ongoing fashion with them about what's working and what's not working, how they can improve and how we can improve.” He was currently in the process of drafting a Memorandum of Understanding between Mission Australia and the police. Although there had been protocols in place, he felt that the regular personnel changes, the greater involvement of the Department of Community Development and the introduction of the Northbridge policy necessitated a more formalised approach. Explained Feasey:

“Every time there's a change of officer in charge, we'll meet with them and say: ‘Here are the protocols, this is how things work etc.’ But in reality that shouldn't be our place because if we say: ‘Here are the protocols,’ the officer can still say: ‘That's fine but I don't care, this is how I work.’ If there was a document in place so that when they put new police in there was an agreed way of working, then we wouldn't have all these different people coming in and putting a different spin on things each time and evolving into something it was never intended to be.”

Exhibit A: Young People in Northbridge Strategy

(From 'State Government Northbridge Strategy: Young People in Northbridge Policy' Office of Crime Prevention, Department of Premier and Cabinet, June 2003 pp. 3-5.)

Where does the Policy apply?

The Northbridge area, for the purpose of this policy, is defined as that area bounded by Roe Street to the south; Beaufort Street to the east; Newcastle Street to the north; the Mitchell Freeway to the west; and, William Street extending to Brisbane Street.

To whom does the Policy apply?

This policy will apply to two categories of children and young people in the Northbridge area:

CATEGORY 1: THOSE CHILDREN NOT UNDER THE IMMEDIATE CARE OF A PARENT OR A RESPONSIBLE ADULT WHO ARE VULNERABLE BY THEIR AGE IN AN ADULT ENTERTAINMENT PRECINCT AT NIGHT.

These are:

- Primary school age children, that is children 12 years of age and under, in the Northbridge precinct during the hours of darkness.
- Young people 13 to 15 years of age in the Northbridge precinct after 10.00pm.

These children and young people often lack a proper awareness of physical or moral risks and the consequences to themselves. They are also at risk of anti-social, offending or health compromising behaviour. The Government authorities and the Northbridge community believe that children and young people of this age and during these hours are at physical or moral danger in this adult entertainment precinct unless under the immediate care of a parent or a responsible adult. Police will have discretion to take action in relation to these children and young people, which may include taking them into immediate care, should they not be making a genuine attempt to leave the Northbridge area.

CATEGORY 2: THOSE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO BY THEIR ANTI SOCIAL, OFFENDING OR HEALTH COMPROMISING BEHAVIOUR ARE AT RISK TO THEMSELVES AND TO OTHERS

These are:

- Any children or young people misbehaving, engaging in violence, intimidation, provoking aggression or other offensive behaviours.
- Any children or young people, visibly affected by or engaging in substance abuse (e.g. alcohol, cannabis, solvents and other substances).
- Any children or young people soliciting or begging.

What does 'immediate care' mean?

'Immediate care' means where a child or young person is under the supervision of a parent or a responsible adult.

How will the Policy be applied?

The implementation, interpretation and operational priority of this policy will rest with police officers or officers of the Department for Community Development who are authorised by the Minister.

- Children and young people considered to be at **low risk** will be advised to leave the area.

- Children and young people considered to be at **medium to high risk** of physical or moral danger or who are misbehaving will be assisted from the streets, assessed and linked to a safe place and to safe people.
- Children and young people who are **offending** will be liable to police action and dealt with in accordance with prevailing laws.

To implement the *Young People in Northbridge Policy* the Police Service and the Department for Community Development will work in collaboration with other State Government agencies, the City of Perth, relevant non-government organisations, the Northbridge business sector and the local community. Children and young people who are processed under this Policy will be reconnected with their families as soon as is practicable.

What will support this Policy?

The service model to support the implementation of this Policy has four phases:

Phase 1: Outreach and Engagement

This phase will involve the Nyoongar Patrol, Department for Community Development (DCD) Outreach Workers, the Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers and the Juvenile Aid Group (JAG) of the Police Service working across Northbridge and identifying young people ‘at risk’. They will be engaging with these young people, building rapport and initially encouraging them to make their way home or to seek appropriate help or assistance.

Phase 2: Processing

This phase will involve police officers taking those children and young people deemed to be in moral or physical danger to the JAG Office at the Central Station area. At this point the goal is to assess the risk faced, access any related DCD information and transport young people to safe places and safe people. DCD and police staff will make the assessments. Mission Australia’s On Track program, located at the same premises, will deal with young people affected by substance misuse and will assist with short-term safe accommodation along with locating families by phone.

Phase 3: Follow-up

The Department for Community Development Project Co-ordinator will ensure that next day follow-up is targeted to those most at risk and will provide the link with other care agencies both government and non-government who are responsible for assisting families and carers.

Phase 4: Debrief

The goal of the debrief session is for key workers and agencies to have a forum in which to discuss issues that have arisen during the previous week’s contact in Northbridge. This will provide a critical link between the processing and follow-up phases.

Exhibit B: Young People in Northbridge Policy – Participating Agencies

Dept for Community Development

3 Outreach Support Workers (Fri / Sat night)

2 Crisis Care Workers (Thu / Fri / Sat night)

1 Project Officer

District Managers and Staff

Police

Juvenile Aid Group (JAG)

Perth City Police

Perth Transit Police

Nyoongar Patrol

Youth Outreach Worker x1

Transport Assistance Workers x 2

Westrail

Transit Guards

Justice

Killara Youth Support Service

Mission Australia

Youth Workers

Education

Retention and Participation Officers

Dept. of Premier and Cabinet

Project Managers (across Government)

Gallop's curfew a winner

All-sides support for Northbridge youth bans

By Steve Pennells

THE controversial decision to ban young people from Northbridge after dark has had overwhelming public support, according to the latest Westpoll.

Almost 80 per cent of WA voters back the State Government's ban and more than three-quarters want it expanded to include other Perth troublespots.

Under the curfew policy, unsupervised children aged 12 and under are banned from Northbridge after dark and 13 to 15-year-olds have to be off the streets by 10pm.

Children under 18 who are misbehaving, engaging in offensive behaviour, affected by drugs or alcohol, soliciting or begging have also been singled out.

The two-week-old curfew has faced opposition from youth groups who said they were not consulted, been branded racist by Aboriginal organisations and was strongly criticised by rank and file at the ALP State conference last weekend.

But polling last week shows Premier Geoff Gallop

appears to have struck a chord with voters.

Most voters said they considered Northbridge more dangerous than other parts of the city at night and many believed the curfew would make the area safer.

But a big minority — 35 per cent — still had reservations about whether it would make any difference to safety in Northbridge.

Support for the curfew also appeared bipartisan, with 83 per cent of Labor voters and 80 per cent of Liberal or National voters supporting the concept.

Support was strong across all age groups.

Liberal voters were more likely than Labor voters to believe that the curfew would make Northbridge safer for visitors.

Pollster Keith Patterson said there was a strong perception that the youth curfew would bring substantial benefits to the community.

"It appears that they equate the curfew with an improvement in safety for people who frequent these areas for a meal or other evening entertainment," he said.

"It is not clear whether the support for the curfew is related to that perceived improvement in safety or a belief that the youngsters on the streets after dark should be taken home for their own safety."

Westpoll NORTHBRIDGE CURFEW

Support for curfew in Northbridge	Support for curfew in other areas	Would the curfew make Northbridge safer?
Support 79	Support 76	Yes 54
Oppose 11	Oppose 14	No 35
Neither 9	Neither 8	Don't know 10
Don't know 1	Don't know 3	

The independent survey was carried out last week through phone interviews with 400 voters across the State. Figures are rounded.